

The State of OUR sport; Past, Present, and Future

fans A continuing series of interviews through the eyes of YOU, our Teams, Promoters, Tracks, Sanctioning Bodies, and Fans...

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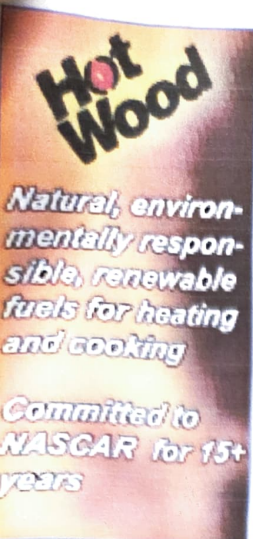
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Keepin' It Simple and Keepin' it Fun!

With 2006 Irwindale Pure Stock Champion – Rick Crow

Before we get into the interview, I want to thank everyone for their help and support with Madera Speedway. We are making progress, and have seen some very encouraging signs that we can all come together for a single purpose. Thank You to All.

12/14/06 And more good news as this is going to Janet. I just got back from Bakersfield. In what had to be the most exciting planning hearing ever held, the Kern County Planning Commission unanimously and enthusiastically approved Kern County's New Home To Nascar. Chills were running through this person as the Chairman of the Commission asked, "who was here to support this project" as literally every hand in the room shot up in support. It was stunned! From the back row of the chambers clear to the Board members themselves raising their hands in approval, it really was amazing! It was a win, a win for our sport! Among all those people, there was not a single voice opposing the track, and if any were there, sunk down in their seats. It was a dominating win. All outside concerns had been planned for and satisfied. Each Board member agreed that precise, collaborative, and patient Planning was the key. Once again it proves to me when racing people come together for a single purpose, what can be



achieved. Great job to the entire Team at KCNHTN whose vision will now become a reality!

RICK CROW- THE INTRO

I've known Rick and his family well over 15 years going back to our Saugus days. Rick is what I consider to be my perfect example of what a Saturday Night Racer is and should be. Every track out there has one like him. He's a racer who has done this for years and years for one simple reason.....Fun. He races not for the Cup dream, not dollars, not even recognition, just for fun. Racing only for putting a trophy in the case knowing he achieved it without cheating, without taking someone out strategically to win the championship, without driving his officials insane, but for fun. (and showing his grandkids one day what he achieved in this great sport)

After each of his wins this season he puts his car into tech, opens the hood, and walks away. Anyone who is interested can check out what makes his car go. He is one of those guys who will drop what he is doing, walk over to a competitor's car, and help you do better when asked. During a mid Summer day at Irwindale I witnessed him spending more time working on his competitors cars, than his. He unloaded, didn't practice, and only helped others do better. If we had that kind of racing spirit throughout our sport, I guarantee we wouldn't be facing the types of problems we are today. Rick's only "Agenda" is to have a good time racing, "like it should be".

As I'm finishing this intro, I just got back from Irwindale, 10/7/06, and it's 2am. I went straight to my laptop to add my night's worth of observations hanging out in his pit. Not long before the main, his rival and competitor in the division walked right up to him and asked what tire pressures he was running now that the track had cooled down. Not missing a beat, he gave him all the stuff, adding even more info than what was asked, including additional balance ideas. That's what I call the "old school" spirit of competition I learned back in my Saugus days with the Hooper, Minty, and Woodside families. I believe that the "spirit of competition as a racing family" that Rick lives by, is something we need more than ever in today's challenges to our sport. Our Madera effort showed some very encouraging signs we are turning the corner toward protecting and promoting our sport as one group, as "one racing family", so our grand kids can enjoy it too. It's my Disney-like dream for us.

Like any family, there sometimes are disagreements, and there will be some strong opinions expressed in this chat. As I said in the original Intro, the intent of these was not to be "sugar coated and politically correct". As we continue to explore this complex subject from all angles, (sanctioning opinions on the issues too), we're trying to do it without the worry of being PC. This is the way I believe most in our racing world like their info (non pc). Well, it's easy for me to say, not so easy to do, and especially when sanctioning body comments arise. Rick and I discussed quite a bit whether to edit those opinions down or out, but in the end he feels this era's emphasis on just about everything being politically correct and controlled at the local level, is one of the things hurting our sport (I agree). Rick was passionate about leaving the chat as it was discussed, and I don't feel it was my place to edit those thoughts. So after due consideration, and with the PC filter shut off, we present the chat in its entirety. I believe many in our Saturday Night racing world hold similar opinions. I think it's important that sanctioning should be aware of those opinions, (it's what many convey in the privacy of the haulers) and therefore has a place in the series. I believe it is time to start the process of addressing these disagreements, as a group, so our sport as a whole can then move on to the significant issues of keeping our racers racing and our racetracks healthy, the ultimate goal of these chats.

That said, let's get to the interview and debate. I've mercifully edited down my usual endless comments to well,.....they're less than normal.....LOL.

THE BEGINNING

Andy D: Where did you grow up, how did you get involved in racing, what was your path to becoming a life long racer.

Rick Crow: I was born and raised in Canyon Country and both my parents were involved in racing. My dad was working with some auto parts stores that sponsored Mike Fortier and Jimmy Insolo. My mom was a diehard Insolo fan, and we went to Saugus Speedway every single week of my life. Sometime in the early 1980's my next door neighbor Gale Litchfield moved in. He had a Sportsman in his garage and was close friends with many racers. He rented Saugus Speedway to practice and said "hey kid go take some laps", and I was hooked. We did the same thing at Riverside and I also got some laps in there. I began racing my own car, and my dad and I traveled to Ventura, Ascot, Santa Maria, Indian Dunes, any dirt track we could find. In 1984 I began at Saugus and stayed there until it closed. (There was no substitute however for learning on dirt).

THE ISSUES AT HAND

AD: How do you see our current issues? What are our problems? What do you see as our biggest challenges? Fans in the stands, race teams, lost racetracks?

RC: I think it is interesting how you lump this all in one category. I believe our biggest challenge is the same as any sport today, Technology, computers, Play Stations etc. Kids want to stay home all the time. We have access to more television channels, etc. There will always be racers, but the challenge is putting people in the stands. Let's face reality. If Saugus Speedway were open today, it would have less fans than it did when it was open. Now if you look at the facilities available, and say if Saugus and Irwindale were open at the same time, I believe the majority of the upper division racers would be at Irwindale and the lower division guys would go to Saugus. I think an issue is the new facilities have equated size with money and fans. If I were to do it, I would have Irwindale the size of the small track with the stands right against the track. Big tracks do not equal fans. Racing action and nice facilities bring fans but there is no substitution for the race in your face, dirt and rubber in your eyes viewing of the short track. Irwindale has done a great job of making the fan experience positive with their car shows, bands, jumpers for kids and their state of the art facilities. The lost tracks are going to happen with real estate expansion. Lost racers are going to happen with increased family and financial responsibilities. I believe the majority of racers are happy at their local short track. The tracks need to stop trying to compete with the big time politics and etc. of NASCAR. Provide something unique and different at the local level. Maybe some rivalries, bumping and grinding , good ole racing.

COSTS AND TIME

Yes, you're going to see these questions in every interview....LOL

AD: What do you think about today's costs versus your early years?

How does yesterday compare to today? Are costs as big an issue as I think they are?

RC: Costs are a huge issue. Just look at the talent pool in all forms of racing. If you bring money you get the ride. There are some great examples of this in the West Series. Costs have escalated, but this has actually helped with time investment. Instead of going out to chase parts like the past, you can access them on line. This is an area where the tracks have not kept up with their rules. They actually have rules written that they think control cost, but they actually make it more difficult on the racer. When I started racing you could come out of the stands and get a Street Stock race ready for \$3500.00. If a fan comes out of the stands at Irwindale and wants a Street Stock, one of those drivers is going to tell him \$10,000.00 upward.

The Pure Stock division is a great way to get drivers and fans interested. It is affordable, and fills the void of short track racing.

Test sessions and the lack of dashes and heat races are killing racing. With this point I mean if you cannot afford to test, track rental, fuel, tires wear and tear, crew etc. you cannot be competitive as there is no substitution for seat time. Guys who test double and triple the laps of those who don't get the advantage. Just think where that puts the

learning curve. The track sells testing to make money, as they should, but I would like to see a limit on it or make it less expensive and attract more cars. Testing also costs the driver more in the area of technology. Tests equal experimentation, and that is not cheap either.

AD: You make many good points here Rick. To me, there's a big picture problem where once again it comes back to the financial issues of running a track in this era. That high buck team that can afford private test sessions; does the track owner allow it, or not? Difficult because we already established the track owners are strapped pretty much across the board, they almost have to take the dollars. The right thing to do competition wise is not allow the private test of course because you really want the field as equal as possible. It again comes back to huge numbers of fans in the stands making those decisions easier for the track owner.

Ok, this is purely Fan Andy's stance on heat races.....Love em. I've had some long discussions with a race director friend about heat races. I love em because it gives those guys who are mid-pack and back a chance to win a race, any race. Speaking as a sponsor, it gives my business more exposure up front, even if a heat race. Many tracks seem to think they're a waste. If you want waste, let's talk about testing, practice and qualifying. (this is gonna get me some hate mail). For me, again speaking purely as a fan and sponsor, those three things don't do anything for me.

AD: Is there anything that can be done about the "Time" investment, and is it a problem? I believe the enhanced competition level has added to the time investment required, and why many people (such as myself) stay out of the competition ranks. I always come back to the Legends series as one that seems to work rather well. National rules, a legend can run at any track coast to coast, parts easily obtained at one dealership, economically run, etc.

RC: Actually the time investment is less during the week now because you hurt less stuff on the big track. This is giving guys more opportunity to fine tune and work on their set-up as they test and get faster. National rules are tough because they do not allow for much diversity in the division car wise. Anytime a racer has to go to one place to get his stuff they are held hostage. The Legend Series works because it is cost effective. The bigger time investment is the all day Saturday deal and then add a test Friday night. Most guys work Monday through Friday and then go racing.

AD: I know of one track out there that the back gate doesn't open until 3pm with just one practice session keeping your Saturday as short as possible.

AD: What do you think about the future of our sport in general (Saturday night short track racing) Many are predicting our demise similar to the drive-in movie theatre.

RC: Well Andy we keep calling it short track racing but that's the one thing it is not. Saugus, Cajon, OSS etc. that is short track racing. NASCAR has ruined short track racing. They used us the local racer and our money to promote and grow their sport. They have given nothing to us in return, and in fact made it harder. They race on TV competing against the local track audience. Unless there is something back door I am missing I don't see why any track needs NASCAR. When was the last time Major League Baseball charged to join a little league? If NASCAR cared about racing, they would send a few of there hot shoes to Irwindale on the Saturday when they are in town to do some promo, or maybe even race against a local guy. That would help expose the local facility. They killed the Southwest Tour and that was as grass roots as it gets. Think about that Hornaday, Carelli, Press, Busch etc. were all from the Tour. Where are all those guys now? Better yet where are their voices in our time of need? They are wrapped up in neat little sponsor packages controlled by NASCAR.

AD: Advice to our sanctioning bodies, our racetracks, our racers?

RC: I am not really sold on the sanctioning body needs unless they are providing an irreplaceable insurance binder. Why would we need them? People talk about lower car counts etc. The fact is there are not lower car counts and here is why. We used to race maybe three or four divisions, say Sportsman, Modifieds, Street Stocks etc. We raced April to Sept. with lots of cars. Now with bigger facilities come bigger expenses and a longer race season. They need more divisions to give guys time off between race dates. The divisions thin out in their individual car counts, but there is actually more cars participating. Does the average fan know the difference between a Late Model and a Super Late Model or a West Coast Pro Truck and a Super Truck? Condensing the divisions is the only way to increase car counts. It might get a little ugly in the transition, but it is the only hope for future growth. The racers will adapt because they are a captive audience, there is not much choice.

AD: I interviewed a number of promoters who had the same comment....too many divisions. I'm not sure at all how to go backwards entirely, but maybe we don't have to. Try this...

Magic Valley Speedway runs something called the Premier Class, it's their top regular division that pits the Late Models against the Modifieds. At first glance, I thought I wouldn't like it. But, once I got there I realized what they had really done. All of a sudden you have a situation with two groups of guys racing against each other who really don't like each other much (competitively speaking of course). We have RIVALRY!! It's the mods against the late models, the Hatfields vs. the McCoy's. It actually works beautifully, and is also a simple way to increase fields without losing divisions. I like it!

AD: Is there anything that can be done to unite Sanctioning, Racers, and Tracks so we're all working toward the same goals? I believe we are all in this together. It's us (the Saturday night racing community) vs. Them (DVD, movies, video games, other racing on tv, etc) as far as I'm concerned. What do you think about that?

RC: Be careful there Andy. We wouldn't want a rivalry or the Hatfields vs. the McCoy's. The fans would love it, but it would not fit into the polished neat little NASCAR packaging. Uniting the tracks will never happen. Even with the involvement of NASCAR this never happened at the local level. The promoters do not want this to happen either, because they don't want to compete with each other. Is there really competition among tracks, and would guys really go elsewhere if the rules were united? I doubt it. We like to race as close as possible to make it easy on our fans, families and sponsors. The only chance we have is marketing our local short track as a family friendly alternative to staying home on Saturday night.

I believe we don't use the media to our advantage. As racers we need to put pressure on our newspapers to provide coverage. If not from the track, then articles on local racers. This is easily done with calls and e-mails to sports editors. I believe local tracks could do more advertising radio, tv, etc. but that can get expensive and it becomes a double edge sword. It also brings us back to Gentlemen Jim, Candy Man, Roarin Oren. Why is reality tv so popular? Why do people like Springer? Why does Jesse James draw a big crowd? They are all unique, don't fit the mold, give you someone to root for and someone to boo. We need to bring the personalities back to racing.

AD: Absolutely!

AD: I believe many of the track owners used to keep their rules different to keep guys from leaving and going to a competing track. Those days are gone aren't they? By having complementary rules and schedules wouldn't it only add to car count? We're down to seven asphalt tracks in the whole state with hundreds of miles between each one except for IS and OSS. I believe it's very old thinking.

RC: Those days are still here and tracks are still competing to lock in their racers. I don't believe it is necessary anymore. Let's face it there is no nicer track than Irwindale

in the United States of America. If I can get there, that's where I am racing period. I don't care what the rules are.

THE KIDS ARE OUR FUTURE

AD: I discuss for hours on end with our promoters about kids or family pricing. I believe the kids down the road are "the" answer. Now is the time to get them hooked, as Steve York at MVS said to me....."before they discover girls".....LOL. I know things are tight at all our racetracks, so I understand when they say we can't afford to let all the kids in free. I'm talking about paying for 2 adults even at a slightly higher rate, but literally loading all the neighborhood kids up in the car and getting them in for a package price. They'll buy the usual tons of concessions and souvenirs I'm sure. That one kid could be the next Racer or Fan for generations. Yes, it's a bit of an investment, but it's an investment in our future. Had I not been exposed to Saugus as a kid, I never would have considering auto racing.

RC: Andy think about this.... Anyone with any marketing knowledge or not realizes that our children are the future. Tobacco companies got rich off marketing to kids and using our sport. McDonalds, cereal companies, toys etc. all market to our kids relentlessly, check out the cartoons on Saturday and Sunday morning. Our future fan base, driver base, and the success of our sport hinges on our ability to get those kids out from behind their computers, televisions and play stations and involved in racing. Once again allowing drivers to have personalities good or bad will spawn a connection to a diverse group of fans and grow our sport. Without driver personalities and fan connections we are slot cars going in a circle!

AD: Enthusiastically agree!

SIMPLIFY.....DON'T LET ANY RACER WALK AWAY

AD: You mentioned what I thought was an interesting concept one night. "Run what you brought, we'll figure it out later". Please elaborate if you can.

RC: Sure. It is amazing to me how many tracks let racers walk away. Take the Southwest Tour and Grand American Modified's. I am sure these guys fit in somewhere. Most tracks go get their rules from another track that has terrible rules. The tracks tweak a few things so they can hold the racer hostage to their track. They are afraid of getting the racer involved in the rule process, but in reality that is the only hope they have for good rules. Rules are terrible to read and interpret especially for beginners. Anyway I have always said there are three sets of rules at every track. The written rules (Follow these and you will never win). The rules they enforce (Follow these and you might win) The rules that are not written too clear (Follow these and you will dominate). I have the philosophy you and I talked about "Run what you brought , we'll figure it out later". Let's see what cars are out there, invite them to come race, see how they do and then equalize them if necessary. Don't let some guy keep his old Saugus Chevelle in his backyard because it is gutted too much for Pure Stocks. Let the modifieds run what they have. Those guys just want to race. Do we need Late Models to fit a template? Does it matter?

Let's cross that bridge when we come to it especially in the entry level divisions. The freak show divisions have become popular because they are cheap and easy to run, and they are entertaining. Fans love the "Pink Car" "Barefoot Billy" and anyone who looks like they are doing something different. When was the last time we heard some big BOO'S at Irwindale. You need them both for entertainment. Everything from television to high school football has rivalries, different mascots, good guy bad guy, white hat black hat. The fans don't care about what division or car you're in. That stuff needs to be behind the scenes, and as simple as possible.

AD: And of course this all leads to stronger car count at each of our tracks.

AD: I've had a number of promoters mention how big a problem cheating is for them both technically and politically (who to tech and when). I was very surprised at the comment as I thought this issue wouldn't even make the list of problems for our promoters. But, after more discussion I learned it creates a situation where the track's focus is taken away from the fans in the stands, marketing, sponsorships, putting on a great show, etc, to instead deal with tech issues, so it does make sense. My question to you is this...Is cheating just a part of racing?

RC: No, cheating is not a part of racing. I don't believe the front- runners in any division are cheaters. They have too much to lose because they are running for a championship, and most have sponsors. I think typically the mid to back pack guys are more likely to cheat because they are frustrated and believe they have to cheat to win. I learned early on in racing that you can assume everyone faster than you is cheating and whine about it, or you can seek out their help with an open mind and maybe try some new things and go compete with them. I can honestly state for the record, "I have never gone to a race with my race car with anything I knew to be illegal". Now the grey area is another deal, and I think any successful racer likes to take a walk in this area now and then! The great thing about racers is they want to race and most guys will help you and be honest with you, right up to the point where you can beat them. Then they get a little tight lipped, but for the new guy the answers are there if you ask and develop relationships. The same guys run up front every year in any division and they're in. If you cannot beat em its easier on your ego to call them a cheater. The squeaky wheel gets the attention so the whiners seem to become the majority. Most of the front runners keep there mind focused on winning and go about it quietly when it comes to tech and interacting with officials.

RETAINING OUR CUSTOMERS (Build your fan base)

AD: Is there anything we can do for newbie fans to link them with a race team? Here's my point. A newbie family has no idea who Rick Crow is at all. It's just a car with a number. For me, the great part about this sport is the people. Knowing the people involved, rooting for the guys you know, etc. I've suggested the occasional driver intro from the grandstands to see who the racers are. (LVMS does this very successfully with the Truck Series) Then, it turns from just a faceless event, (to the newbie fan) into rooting for someone you actually know or maybe shaken the hand of. I believe this is CRITICAL. I've watched you race for years, I'm a fan and one of the reasons I go to Irwindale when you're racing. I find the point no different than being a Dodger fan watching say Baltimore and Texas playing. Who cares! When you actually care and can root for the person racing, it creates the reason for that fan to return. I'm going to go way out there and say your fans should be an extension of your race team when done right. Just getting that family to show up 1 or 2 times more per season will make a huge difference when everyone is making the "connection" if you will. I guess this isn't really a question, just a comment. What do you think of that?

RC: Here is the deal Andy, it is not the tracks responsibility to market Rick Crow or my sponsors, it is Rick Crow's responsibility. The track is the facilitator and Irwindale does a better job of this than any track I have been to. If I fail to market myself and my sponsors, then shame on me. Racers must be accessible to the fans before and after the races. For me this is easy as I love to connect with kids and people. I have this year alone seen at least 10-15 people who I met this year now showing up to every race to watch me. The reason for most of this was my connection first to their children. I believe some racers get this, but the majority do not. It amazes me how many people think we are big time racers and idolize us. It amazes me how many of us think we are big time racers and idolize ourselves. We are back full circle on the "Barefoot Billy's, Jesse James and "Pink Panthers" something to identify with, love or hate. Fans identify with hot cars, rivalries and the "Freak Shows", we should be humble in our approach as not many of us get to do this. I had a soldier from Iraq come up to me this year in the autograph session and say " You must have a lot of guts to do this, I could never do this" I said to the guy "You're nuts, you just fought a war in Iraq" I think everything from here on out is downhill" Fans look up to us and are there to see us. Without fans

there is no beginning to the circle. We need to give back as often as we can. The problem is too many racers think it is all about them.

AD: Coming from the entertainment business, I understand the very important need for "Stars" in our racing. I truly believe it is another one of the "keys" to our future. There is a very good reason Tom Cruise gets twenty million per film, he puts butts in the seats. I don't see our sport as being any different. If you're the racer or division that puts people in the stands, just about everything is perfect. Your track will be healthy, you are growing your fan base, and sponsors will notice and act upon that popularity. Everything else falls into place.

A RACERS WAY

AD: If you were king of all this, how would you fix it step by step, how does Rick Crow bring us back on track?

RC: In my younger naïve days I would have had an answer ready, but now I am much wiser and believe I understand just about everyone's view from the track owner, to the racer. I'll give it a shot though.

1. I would never let there be empty seats. If I knew I averaged 2k and my track fit 4k, I would be giving away 2k seats every week to charities and the local radio stations. This would increase exposure but also revenue because people would still eat and drink once they get there.
2. I would condense the divisions to increase competition and car counts. Ensure I had a healthy entry level division, and the jumps for a driver to move up must be financially digestible.
3. I would quit being so paranoid about rules. Ever since I began racing you could tell in the pre-season who the big guns were going to be no matter what division they were in. The same guys win no matter where they go. hat we overlook is there are only ten guys or so in each division, if you are lucky, who make every single race. The majority are just plugging along trying to have some fun. I would not mess with these guys in tech.
4. I would make tech a wheel to spin at the end of every night. I would place several options on the wheel and have someone spin it. That's what we would check that night.
5. I would put claims on everything. Then you just tell a guy if he does not like something, to claim it.
6. Allow the racers to have personalities. Without rivalries, personalities, and some good old bumping and grinding, we're just cars going in circles. Fans need to be able to relate.

Now that I have ticked off half the racers out there, you see why no one wants this "King" job you offer.

Andy allow me to close with this. Ron Hornaday was welding the cage in my first race car, and I was sitting out front with his Father in Law and longtime racer Wild Bill Foster who had quit racing. I asked him why he quit (and keep in mind I was 16yrs old). He said "Young man, when racing quits being fun, you should quit racing".

I am still having fun so I am still racing. We should not dwell on the negative but the positives racing has brought to our lives. For me lifelong friends Danny Grill, Lee Ladd, Gerrit Cromsigt, Brian Kelley, Rip Michels and countless fans and acquaintances. Racing owes me nothing, as what I have gained from this sport is irreplaceable in my life.

AD: I think you'd do a great job as "King"!

Thanks Rick for your take on our sport, more excellent input and perspectives from our racers. Keep doing what you're doing, and I'll be there to enjoy it.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Competition for the entertainment dollar is intense and driven by technology (video games, internet, etc). We need to get back to "race in your face, dirt and rubber in your eyes viewing" being close to the action of our short tracks.

- Provide something unique and different at the local level. Rivalry, bumping and grinding , good ole racing.
- Costs and rule changes are intertwined. Rules are written that think they control cost, but they actually make it more difficult on the racer
- Test sessions and the lack of dashes and heat races are killing racing.
- Sanctioning, is it necessary?
- Too many divisions and extended race seasons are spreading the car count.
- We like to race as close as possible to make it easy on our fans, families and sponsors.
- We need to be marketing our local short track as a family friendly alternative to staying home on Saturday night.
- I believe we don't use the media to our advantage.
- We need to be unique. Don't fit the mold, give a fan someone to root for and someone to boo. We need to bring the personalities back to racing.
- The kids are indeed our future. Our future fan base, driver base, and the success of our sport hinges on our ability to get those kids out from behind their computers, televisions and play stations and involved in racing. Once again allowing drivers to have personalities good or bad will spawn a connection to a diverse group of fans and grow our sport. Without driver personalities and fan connections we are slot cars going in a circle!
- *Simplify. Do more "run what ya brung". Lets get all our cars back to our race tracks instead of sitting in garages.*
- It is up to each race team and driver to build their fan base and is an important part of the puzzle.

Andy Daddario
Saugus, Ca.

comments about this article can be sent to [andydadd \[at\] yahoo \[dot\] com](mailto:andydadd[at]yahoo[dot]com)

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